

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Personal relationships reveal common good



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Last week, I was a guest at the Council on Foreign Relations' annual workshop on religion and foreign policy. It was a most stimulating event, with more than 100 religious leaders from many different traditions present. We learned about the role of religion in many areas of the world including Syria, China and South Sudan. There were sessions on climate change, anti-Semitism, global migration and refugees, nuclear proliferation, and racial and ethnic inequality.

The final panel was on Pluralism, Polarization and the Common Good. Panelists included a rabbi, a professor, and a Muslim who was introduced as a Republican. Rabbi Jack Moline, president of the Interfaith Alliance, made the point that in the Jewish rabbinic tradition, humans are described as having two inclinations, one to good and the other to evil. But, noting that evil cannot be redeemed but only destroyed, he proposed instead the contrast between altruism and selfishness. Selfishness, he asserted, can be changed and redeemed.

The key is the affirmation of love, which

is taught by all of the religious traditions. The first step is the act of invitation: inviting into conversation the person who may seem to be the stranger or the person with whom you totally disagree. It is by conversation that we can move toward seeking the common good. As long as we stay in our isolated echo chambers and fail to reach out to someone who believes differently, either in terms of religion or in politics, we will never move to the common good. It is in brave acts of conscience that we can find the common ground that will enable us to change attitudes, values, and even laws.

These brave acts are not likely to come from our politicians, who are reluctant to take bold statements that could alienate their base. The point was made that politics is "downstream from culture." Or as one of the panelists put it, "Politicians look for a parade and then try to get in front of it."

Significant change toward the common good must come from our basic values, and it is religions that perpetuate and form our values. In my years of interfaith work, I have been privileged to not only learn about the many differences between the religious stories and differing truth claims, but to also learn about the essential agreement on basic values. I have especially learned this

by developing personal relationships with people from very different cultures and religious perspectives. We don't have to agree on everything in order to learn from each other. In fact, it can be argued that we will never learn if we only interact with people with whom we agree. That will only solidify our attitudes and prejudices.

Without personal relationships, all you have are categories. When I put someone in a category, I learn nothing, but merely reinforce a limited and probably inaccurate stereotype. It is such stereotypes that lead to discrimination and prejudice. It is when we encounter people in a personal relationship that we open ourselves to being informed and even change. Of course, in the process the other person is also opening to change. In such encounters, we have the opportunity to find ways to promote the common good.

Whether it is an inclination to good vs. evil or altruism vs. selfishness, we can make the decision to be open to new ideas, new experiences and new encounters with those we might be tempted to see as "other" or as just a category.

The easiest route is to just stay in our own ways and not take up the challenge. But each decision we make is taking us down

the road to a more isolated and ultimately selfish perspective -- or to a larger world of ideas and the potential to achieve the common good.

I am reminded of the story of the old Cherokee chief who was teaching his grandson about life. He told the boy that we are all born with two wolves within us and there is a terrible fight going on between these two wolves. One wolf is evil, prone to anger, envy, greed, and selfishness. The other is good and seeks peace, love, kindness, generosity, compassion, humility, and faith.

The chief tells his grandson that the same fight is going on inside you and every person. After thinking about it for a while the grandson finally asks his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

To which the old chief simply replied, "The one you feed."

Whether it is the rabbinic scholars or the Native American chief, we must face the choice we all have as we go through life. Are we feeding the inclination to do good, encounter the other and seek peace? Let's make this our commitment; our choice will either bring more polarization or move us toward the common good.

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